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Mutating masculinity: re-visions of gender and violence in the cinema of David Cronenberg.

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Abstract: Though the films of David Cronenberg might not always be concerned with gender from a social constructivist or performative perspective, I think one readily agrees with Linda Ruth Williams' claim that "for Cronenberg, anatomy is anything but destiny"³. For decades, his characteristic mutations of gendered bodies have repeatedly accompanied the destabilization of fixed notions about gender. It seems that the most fixed notion of gender to be found in his work is that gender is mutable. Like the physical borders to bodies in his films, gender is repeatedly undone, constantly shifting, threatening to become something else. For Cronenberg, a perpetual undoing and rearticulation of gender raises the question of when a man becomes a man in a rather unconventional manner. His films initially encourage us to ask other questions, like: "When does a man become a walking, speaking anus?" (Naked Lunch); "when does a man become an insect?" (The Fly); "when does a man become a machine?" (Videodrome, The Fly, Crash, eXistenZ). Of course one would also have to ask: "When does a man become a woman?" (Crimes of the Future, M. Butterfly) "When is a man completely unable to enter manhood?" (Spider) "When is a man a monster?" and "Is a man ever 'simply' a man?" (most of his films). It seems that with the release of each new film, one must rearticulate inquiries into the staging of gender in Cronenberg's work, which is precisely what I wish to do here. Cronenberg's recent films once again require viewers to reconsider the questions of when a man is a man and what a man might become, and to address these questions as earnest social reflections.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14361/transcript.9783839417201.151>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-148368>

Book Section

Published Version

Originally published at:

Loren, Scott (2011). Mutating masculinity: re-visions of gender and violence in the cinema of David Cronenberg. In: Läubli, Martina; Sahli, Sabrina. Männlichkeiten denken : aktuelle Perspektiven der kulturwissenschaftlichen Masculinity Studies. Bielefeld: Transkript, 151-170.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14361/transcript.9783839417201.151>

Mutating Masculinity

Re-Visions of Gender and Violence in the Cinema of David Cronenberg

SCOTT LOREN

While feminist critics such as Barbara Creed have emphasized monstrous femininity in Cronenberg's work [...] overall, and certainly in his most recent work, Cronenberg has been interested in mutating masculinity.

LINDA RUTH WILLIAMS¹

“WHEN IS A MAN A MAN?”²

Though the films of David Cronenberg might not always be concerned with gender from a social constructivist or performative perspective, I think one readily agrees with Linda Ruth Williams' claim that “for Cronenberg, anatomy is anything but destiny”³. For decades, his characteristic mutations of gendered bodies have repeatedly accompanied the destabilization of fixed notions about gender. It seems that the

1 Williams, Linda Ruth (1999): “The Inside-out of Masculinity: David Cronenberg's Visceral Pleasures”, in: Michele Aaron (ed.), *The Body's Perilous Pleasures: Dangerous Desire and Contemporary Culture*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 30-48, p. 35.

2 Erhart, Walter/Herrmann, Britta (ed. 1997): *Wann ist der Mann ein Mann? Zur Geschichte der Männlichkeit*, Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler.

3 L.R. Williams 1999, p. 39.

most fixed notion of gender to be found in his work is that gender is mutable. Like the physical borders to bodies in his films, gender is repeatedly undone, constantly shifting, threatening to become something else. For Cronenberg, a perpetual undoing and rearticulation of gender raises the question of when a man becomes a man in a rather unconventional manner. His films initially encourage us to ask other questions, like: “When does a man become a walking, speaking anus?” (*Naked Lunch*); “when does a man become an insect?” (*The Fly*); “when does a man become a machine?” (*Videodrome*, *The Fly*, *Crash*, *eXistenZ*). Of course one would also have to ask: “When does a man become a woman?” (*Crimes of the Future*, *M. Butterfly*) “When is a man completely unable to enter manhood?” (*Spider*) “When is a man a monster?” and “Is a man ever ‘simply’ a man?” (most of his films). It seems that with the release of each new film, one must rearticulate inquiries into the staging of gender in Cronenberg’s work, which is precisely what I wish to do here. Cronenberg’s recent films once again require viewers to reconsider the questions of when a man is a man and what a man might become, and to address these questions as earnest social reflections.

Without exception, Cronenberg’s films deal with sex and violence in some form. Again and again, staging sex and violence provides a field in which gender issues and structures of authority are taken into consideration. I am interested in identifying a possible progression in the portrayal of violence, which is always explicitly gendered in Cronenberg’s work. This can be observed from the monstrous mother in early films up to the monstrous father in recent films. It seems that within this trajectory, Cronenberg’s films move from reflections on masculine anxieties about gender toward critical contemplations of violence, particularly as it relates to structures of patriarchal authority, masculine social practices and male desire. Thus, his films become conscientiously contemplative of an element that has prominently characterized his work from the beginning: violence. Simultaneously, they reflect on a topic that has been at the crux of film and gender theory since Laura Mulvey’s seminal text *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975/1989): male desire and patriarchal authority, particularly as they plot viewing positions, desiring subjects, and objects of the desirous gaze.⁴

4 Cf. Mulvey, Laura (1989): “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, in: Screen 16.3, p. 6-18. For use of the term “viewing positions” see Williams,

Having in mind Mulvey's claim that subject, object and viewing positions are determined through male desire in classical Hollywood cinema, one quickly recognizes that, even if it can never be disconnected from an organizing principle of masculine desire, Cronenberg's work does not fit neatly into this theory. At first sight, Hitchcock's tongue-in-cheek formula for cinematic pleasure – "torture the women" – seems to be applicable to Cronenberg as well, and perhaps remains so to a great extent. However, beyond male desire as structuring principle of spectatorship, we see tortured male subjects, the male gaze directed at male objects, and men struggling through gendered terrains of violence. If we assume that Cronenberg makes men's films, it is perhaps not precisely in the sense Mulvey originally theorized. In his most recent films, Cronenberg continues to become an increasingly refined critic of social structures, practices and socio-symbolic fictions. He is particularly interested in masculine histories of violence and masculinity as performance and spectacle, where matriarchal ideologies and social structures clash with phallic authority and the pleasures of homosexual voyeurism as Steve Neale theorized them are increasingly freed from repression.⁵

MONSTROUS MUTATIONS

Drawing on Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject in her seminal work *The Monstrous Feminine*, Barbara Creed addresses the portrayal of "woman as monstrous womb"⁶ in David Cronenberg's *The Brood*. Creed claims that the feminine is portrayed as horrific and abject because of her power to give birth. Many of Cronenberg's earlier films stage visions of horror as intimately bound to the female body and female sexuality. Indeed, as Lianne McLarty points out, "feminist critics have responded with horror at the extent to which these films

Linda (ed. 1994): *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

5 Cf. Neale, Steve (1993): "Masculinity as Spectacle", in: Steven Cohan/Ina Rae Hark (ed.), *Screening the Male: Exploring masculinities in Hollywood cinema*, London/New York: Routledge, pp. 9-20.

6 Creed, Barbara (1993): *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, London: Routledge, p. 43.

hinge on their monstrous vision of the feminine.”⁷ She argues, though, that one can identify a progression in Cronenberg’s work from horror happening at the site of the female body in films like *Shivers*, *Rabid* and *The Brood*, on to horror as detached from the body and residing in an “invaded” male psyche in films such as *Scanners*, *Videodrome* and *The Dead Zone*, and finally arriving at a monstrous, predatory male “representative of patriarchal social practices”⁸ in *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers*.

Cronenberg’s progression toward the staging of violent and socially disruptive patriarchal social practices might open a new perspective on his earlier films. One may ask whether the early films support a view of the monstrous feminine that *should* be repressed in favor of the patriarchal ideological institutions it poses a threat to (the misogynist reading), or whether the depiction of the monstrous feminine might in fact function as a point of departure for Cronenberg’s filmic commentary on the violent patriarchal social practices that codify such monstrous woman as monstrous in the first place (an anti-patriarchal-authority reading). In both *The Brood* and *Rabid*, for example, the woman protagonist becomes a monster because a paternal male figure has medically or clinically manipulated her. Helen W. Robins’ claims regarding womb envy in *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers* suggest that the problem is not female monstrousness, but rather the “phallic power [that] relegates nature, matter and the female to a position of inferiority, otherness and objecthood”⁹. To put it another way, one might ask whether it makes sense to view these filmic incorporations of the monstrous feminine primarily as symptomatic of the violently repressive patriarchal socio-symbolic order the films depict. In these depictions women are denied the access to desire and drive men have and feminine social practices are subordinated to phallic authority. Reading

7 McLarty, Lianne (1996): “‘Beyond the Veil of the Flesh’: Cronenberg and the Disembodiment of Horror”, in: Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 231-252, p. 231.

8 Ibid. p. 232.

9 Robbins, Helen W. (1993): “‘More Human Than I Am Alone’: Womb envy in David Cronenberg’s *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers*”, in: S. Cohan/I.R. Hark (eds.), *Screening the Male: Exploring masculinities in Hollywood cinema*, London/New York: Routledge, pp. 134-147, p. 134.

representations of monstrous women as symptoms of a patriarchal order helps us to rethink Linda Ruth Williams' claim that the later films are primarily "interested in mutating masculinity"¹⁰. One might claim that with the earlier films, masculinity mutates femininity, whereas in the later films masculinity is itself mutated through the volition of male subjects. There is thus a tripartite notion of mutating masculinity to be found here: masculinity as mutating female subjects, masculinity as mutating male subjects, and masculinity in mutation through the progression from the former to the later. As for masculinity mutating male subjects, in films such as *Videodrome*, *Scanners*, *The Dead Zone*, *The Fly*, *Dead Ringers* and, arguably, *Spider*, masculine subjects become monstrous through the patriarchal institutions they inhabit and control, whereas in *History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises*, complex and morally questionable male figures struggle to dismantle the phallic patriarchal institutions that have in part made them what they are. What the viewer encounters in *History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises* are partially emancipated forms of masculinity that also act as emancipating agents. In both films the male protagonist appears to have gained some mastery over the troubled and troubling conditions of phallic authority, though not being separate from such conditions. The male protagonists then align themselves with representatives of maternal social practices and matriarchal agency.

Bearing in mind Cronenberg's implementation of horror and violence as modes of representation through which gender-related anxieties and phantasies are played out, I would extend McLarty's notion of progression to include the element of gendered authority in the later films. His *eXistenZ*, still very much in the tradition of body horror and technological threat serving as fields onto which sexual and gender antagonisms are projected, marks a turning point in this progression toward emancipation. Here, the female subject possesses agency and knowledge, and knows how to negotiate her way through the violent social (and virtual) terrain. Inverting masculine phallic authority, she instructs the male protagonist in practices of 'authorship' as well as bodily penetration and pleasure. The inversion of phallic authority in *eXistenZ* is instructive for interpreting the portrayal of gendered authority in *A History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises*, where positions of power between phallic paternal *jouissance* and maternal desire

10 See footnote 1.

clash. These more recent films pointedly address the condition of violent masculine social practices in which masculine subjects are perpetually redefined vis-à-vis both emancipated and potentially victimized female subjects that destabilize and force a renegotiation of masculine subjectivity against the background of violent masculine histories. At the same time a third position of ethical subjectivity is opened up and presented through the male protagonist.

We can identify a trajectory of masculine subjectivity in Cronenberg's work, taking into consideration portrayals of both the 'sick' male psyche and predatory male social practices, but also moving on toward a more optimistic positioning of the male subject: a male subject who may be inextricably anchored to histories of violence, but who nevertheless struggles against these histories and the institutions that sustain violent patriarchal social practices. The male subject moves toward an emancipated masculinity that is not ideologically structured by a violent, predatory, phallic Law, but through feminine ideologies of nurturing and social technologies of family. One must also claim, though, that male recourse to action is often one of spectacular masculine violence when confronted by masculine violence. The later element makes it particularly difficult to argue for a form of masculinity truly emancipated from phallic authority/power in Cronenberg's work. However, that is perhaps neither possible, nor, for Cronenberg's purposes, even desirable. Maybe it is precisely this phallic power that makes a man a man, or that makes a man masculine in a traditionally gendered sense. In any event, if one is to seek visions and revisions of gender in the work of Cronenberg, one must be aware that these are always characterized by visions of horror and the monstrous. As such, gender becomes deviant *per se*: a mutation. In order to judge the vicissitudes of what a man becomes in Cronenberg's work, we might take a synoptic look at his portrayals of gender.

MONSTROUS WOUNDS, WANDERING WOMBS AND PSYCHIC ROOMS

Though all his films resist many of the conventions dictated by genre, Cronenberg's work significantly helps to shape the emerging genre of body horror in the second half of the 1970s. Where conventional horror is usually reflecting on issues like psycho-social anxieties regard-

ing sexuality, diseases and oppressive social institutions in an implicit manner, these social preoccupations are staged explicitly in *Shivers* and *Rabid*. Chris Rodley refers to such portrayals as Cronenberg's "concern for the breakdown of social order through the eruption of sexuality and disease".¹¹ In both films, organic disease is transmitted sexually, literally turning human bodies into abject material to be disposed of. This was not entirely novel at the time. The disturbing portrayal of bodies as waste and of an uncontrollable organic agency taking over the human form was also central to the horror of George Romero's 1968 seminal film *Night of the Living Dead*. What was radical about Cronenberg's contribution to the genre with these two films was his portrayal of gender, in particular regarding masculine technologies and the female body. Lianne McLarty suggests that in

"*Rabid* and *Shivers* [...] scientific experiments on women's bodies result in consequences that have much more to do with the female body as the site of disgust than with male science as a source of horror. As in *The Brood*, the horror in *Rabid* is dependant on the monstrous transformation of the female body."¹²

McLarty acknowledges that the transformation of the female body is due to male agency and masculine medical and scientific technologies, but she rightly points out that this doesn't necessarily detract from the staging of the notion or presentation of the female body as an anxiety-inducing location of threat and disgust. What might potentially be conceived as more threatening than the masculine medical technologies transforming female bodies in *Rabid* and *Shivers*, though, is the portrayal of women in possession of phallic sexual desire/drive. This is made explicit on a variety of levels in *Rabid*. McLarty points out that it is precisely the protagonist Rose's sexual voracity that is threatening. On the one hand, this is 'pre-coded' in the character via the casting of Marilyn Chambers, an Ivory Soap poster girl turned porn star. The 'masculineness' of the claim she stakes to sexual enjoyment and its public display is further supported visually and turned monstrous via the vampiric phallus with which she penetrates her victims to satisfy

11 Rodley, Chris (ed. 1997): Cronenberg on Cronenberg, London: Faber and Faber, p. xvii.

12 L. McLarty 1996, p. 236.

her desire: “It is Rose’s aggressive, literally phallic, and ultimately diseased sexuality that defines her as monstrous.”¹³ As a result of emergency plastic surgery, Rose develops a vaginal opening in her underarm. Protruding from this opening is an unmistakably penis-like organ, with which she penetrates and sucks the blood of her victims.

Female desire is portrayed as predatory and perverse, a threatening *jouissance* characterizing female sexuality. There seems to be a logical progression in the depiction of gender and the monstrous in Cronenberg’s subsequent horror film, *The Brood*: the staging of woman as monstrous is not merely due to her proximity to the abject in the form of blood and exposed organs, but – particularly as these relate to her sexuality and capacity for regeneration – *menstrual* blood and an externalized, visible womb.

Barbara Creed famously suggested that in films such as Cronenberg’s *The Brood* and Ridley Scott’s *Alien*, it is the archaic mother’s generative power that makes her dreadful. “The womb is the horrifying *per se* and with patriarchal discourses it has been used to represent woman’s body as marked, impure and part of the natural/animal world.”¹⁴ Elisabeth Bronfen characterized Cronenberg’s work as “postmodern performances of hysteria” in which we witness “corporeality gone awry”¹⁵. She points out that what we see with Cronenberg is the Freudian notion of the hysteric as a body haunted by the mind, where psychic disorders manifest in somatic disturbance, literally making the psychic visible on the body of the hysteric. She poignantly notes that the externalization of organic interiors in Cronenberg’s films is horrific not only by virtue of their abject materiality, but by dint of materializing psychic energies:

“a disturbance in psychic topology not only finding a correspondence in the dysfunctioning of a body interior, but also in an externalization of both disturbances [...] What has remained unvisualized – because it belongs either to the psychic reality, whose only representation is through phantasy, or to the realm of a body interior not readily open to sight – is horrifically rendered external.”¹⁶

13 L. McLarty 1996, p. 237.

14 B. Creed 1993, p. 49.

15 Bronfen, Elisabeth (1998): *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and its Discontents*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp. 381, 382.

16 E. Bronfen 1998, p. 382.

The literal portrayal of hysteria's "wandering womb" finds its apotheosis in the character of Nola Carveth (Samantha Eggar), whose womb is portrayed as an external appendage and who can literally materialize psychic energies in the form of her demonic brood.

As with *Shivers*' Dr. Emil Hobbes and *Rabid*'s Dr. Dan Keloid, Nola's mutation becomes possible through the intervention of a male doctor, establishing a dialectic in which masculine technologies give rise to monstrous female bodies and a perversion of feminine nature. Within these films' narrative diegeses, masculinity is portrayed as a disruptive agency in the form of scientific technologies that threaten to corrupt nature and have a lethal backlash, or, as Cronenberg said of his first two independent feature films, *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future*, "there is this idea of a man-made, man-controlled environment short-circuiting the concept of evolution"¹⁷. The implicit, extra-diegetic social commentary on masculinity these films express is one that, as Bronfen points out, conflates "womb envy (the desire to create artificially) and womb anxiety (the fear of mortality)"¹⁸. The masculine desire to create results, Frankenstein-like, in technological monstrosities, and the fear of mortality is expressed through anxiety about female generative sexuality and perversions thereof.

These thematic elements remain prominent throughout Cronenberg's work and are particularly visible in *Scanners*, where *in utero* injections on pregnant women give rise to people with telepathic and telekinetic abilities; in *The Fly*, where scientist Seth Brundle creates a womb-like teleportation pod that simultaneously regenerates and degenerates him; and in *Dead Ringers*, where, as Robbins suggests, the twin gynecologists the Mantle brothers "offer an anatomy of modern male womb envy, laying bare its origins in men's anxieties about creativity, and especially about controlling, keeping and getting credit for their productions"¹⁹. The womb as location for gender conflict continues to characterize Cronenberg's work, most visibly in *eXistenZ*, which re-presents *The Fly*'s telepod in the form of a virtual reality game that transports players into a kind of *in utero* phantasy space (characters are depicted lying on a bed in the fetal position while 'playing') and the 2007 production *Eastern Promises*, which opens

17 Cronenberg quoted in C. Rodley, 1997, p. 27.

18 E. Bronfen 1998, p. 391.

19 H. Robbins 1993, p. 136.

with a raped and drugged pregnant woman giving birth to a child and dying in the process. As McLarty has pointed out, though, from *Scanners* onward there is also a shift in focus onto ‘invaded’ male psyches.

In contrast to earlier films, *Scanners*, *Videodrome* and *The Dead Zone* all feature male protagonists whose minds/brains have mutated. As the promotional posters point out: “Their thoughts can kill” (*Scanners*); “First it controls your mind” (*Videodrome*); “In his mind, he has the power to see the future. In his hands, he has the power to change it” (*The Dead Zone*). Although the first two are still within the body horror genre, the focus on the invaded male psyche marks a definite shift in the development of gendered violence in Cronenberg’s work. McLarty suggests that “the movement in Cronenberg’s films from a horror of the female body to that of the male mind has meant a progressive uncoupling of not only the monstrous and the body, but also the monstrous and the feminine.”²⁰ The corrupt male psyches in these films are counterpoints to the monstrous wombs of Cronenberg’s earlier films. *Dead Ringers* makes the mirroring at work here explicit: the Mantle brothers diagnose their patient Claire Niveau as having a “trifurcated” reproductive system, making her on the one hand monstrous and on the other an exotic object of interest/desire suited to their peculiar taste. Aside from the brothers’ claim that Claire is a “mutant woman”, she is portrayed physically, psychically and socially as perfectly normal throughout the film. The Mantle brothers, on the other hand, degenerate into drug addiction, madness and, finally, death. The real freak mutants are clearly the Mantle twins. *Dead Ringers* might thus function as a kind of literary coda to Cronenberg’s preceding work, suggesting that perhaps the problem has been the male psyche and masculine scientific and social technologies all along.

To rearticulate Bronfen’s claims about hysteria characterizing Cronenberg’s work, one might say that the hysterical symptoms of the unhealthy *male psyche* manifest at the somatic site of the *female body*, inscribing physical otherness in a mind/body duality via psychic energy. The inscription of masculine psychic energies on other bodies is *the* organizing narrative principal of Cronenberg’s *Naked Lunch*, a filmic adaptation of elements from William Burroughs’ biography and literary work. This thematic element remains central to Cronenberg’s portrayals of gender. Like the physical violence exposing bodily inter-

20 L. McLarty 1996, p. 235.

iors that characterizes his work, the imposing of male psychic and libidinal energies onto ‘other’ physical bodies is not only native to the “invaded psyche” films, but to the whole spectrum of his films.

EXPOSING INTERIORS, IMPOSING EXTERIORS

M. Butterfly stages many of Cronenberg’s ongoing interests: male/female separation, sexual difference and polymorphous or omni-sexuality.²¹ It does so by presenting femaleness and femininity as an act that can be performed by a male, and at the same time stimulate male desire. Leighton Grist points out that, with *The Crying Game*, *Orlando*, *Farewell My Concubine*, *Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert* and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*, *M. Butterfly* is one of several films in a very short period of cinematic history that thematize transvestitism.²² The film is based on David Henry Hwang’s play of the same title, which is in turn based on real-life events involving French diplomat Bernard Boursicot and Shi Pei Pu, a Chinese opera singer turned spy. Notable about the homosexual relationship, one-sidedly ‘assumed’ to be heterosexual, is its duration of twenty years. As many critics suggest, the relationship is only plausible if thought in terms of denial or (Lacanian) disavowal. That is, the creation of gender roles in this narrative functions if there is a consensual construction of femininity at the site of a male body. Thus, the performativity at stake here is not effectively one man’s projection-enactment of femininity at the site of his own body, but is accompanied by the investment of a second man’s libidinal, psychic energies, creating a fantastic, inextricable play between the internal (desire) and the external (appearance). Linda Ruth Williams convincingly argues that it is precisely the play between feminine interiority and masculine exteriority that characterizes Cronenberg’s male characters: “Femininity is central to Cronenberg’s masculinity, precisely because of its interiority”.²³ *M. Butterfly* is less a case of mistaken gender identity

21 Cf. C. Rodley 1997, p. 31.

22 Cf. Grist, Leighton (2003): “‘It’s Only a Piece of Meat’: Gender Ambiguity, Sexuality, and Politics in *The Crying Game* and *M. Butterfly*”, in: *Cinema Journal* 42.4, pp. 3-28.

23 L.R. Williams 1999, p. 37.

and more one of possible male sexualities, where femininity and masculinity are non-exclusive, their malleability being expressed at the Cronenbergian site of the malleable *par excellence*: the body surface.²⁴ Though *M. Butterfly* is the least physically violent film of Cronenberg's oeuvre to date, it is very much in line with his concerns about mutable physical surfaces, masculine gender and sex.

His subsequent film, *Crash*, is not very different in this regard, though masculinity, sex and malleable physical surfaces are coupled with a more typically Cronenbergian style of violence. Here, we also see a return to fetishized masculine technologies that are no longer in the science-fiction style of life-threatening biological epidemics, but nevertheless fuse masculine technology, sex and death with a play on interiority and exteriority. Where the fetishized masculine technologies of *M. Butterfly* are represented in the form of social technologies of military and the state, and with interiority and exteriority represented in terms of projected desire and gender performance, *Crash* fuses the mechanical technology of cars and medical prosthetics with mutable body surfaces and their interiors in a highly sexualized and literal manner. Williams claims that Cronenberg's

"ongoing concern with 'masculinity in crisis' is frequently dramatized through an impossible vision of male interiority, often of male bodies literally breaking apart at the seams, or developing new, feminine seams which then break open."²⁵

There is James Woods' vaginal abdominal opening from which he extracts the phallus in the form of a gun in *Videodrome*, Jeff Goldblum's physical emasculation as his human appendages fall off in *The Fly*, Jeremy Irons' evisceration that ends with a fusing of the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' halves of the Mantle twins in *Dead Ringers*,

24 Cronenberg makes this point when he claims he didn't want to cast a man who was as convincingly feminine as Jaye Davidson from *The Crying Game*: "I wanted a man. When Gallimard and Song are kissing, I wanted it to be two men. I wanted the audience to feel that." (Cronenberg quoted in C. Rodley 1997, p. 180).

25 L.R. Williams 1999, p. 32. Here, the use of 'crisis' is a productive condition (like Bronfen's Lacanian-inflected use of 'trauma') that necessarily gives rise to a proliferation of possible narrative ontologies.

John Lone's vagina which isn't one in *M. Butterfly*, and Jude Law's vaginal game port in *eXistenZ*. In *Crash*, we find the omnisexuality of Cronenberg's earlier films: orifices on men's bodies are used for male phallic pleasure, women also have access to masculine phallic sexuality, and both male and female bodies acquire vaginal-wound openings that are the source of giving and receiving pleasure as well as pleasurable pain. Such exposed interiors, or interiority made exterior on the male body are not so much *in-corporations* of femaleness at the site of the male body as *ex-posures* of feminine interiority inhabiting the male body. One can thus identify a pattern throughout Cronenberg's films in which what we might call the "technologies of gender" shift over and through gendered bodies: on the one hand, masculine technologies and masculinity as technology invade the female body (*Rabid*, *Shivers*, *The Brood*, *Scanners*, *Dead Ringers*), and on the other hand female interiority and femininity are brought to the surface of male bodies and infuse masculinity (*Videodrome*, *The Dead Zone*, *The Fly*, *M. Butterfly*, *Crash*, *eXistenZ*). If this is a constant in Cronenberg's work, the question of where it is to be found in his most recent films arises. Although Cronenberg had less to do with the scripts for *A History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises* than usual, and although the representation of sex and violence appear to be of a different nature in these two films (perhaps even more conservative or conventional), I contend that they are very much within the tradition outlined above.

EMBODIED TECHNOLOGIES

Why does the gendered violence in *History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises* seem to be of a different nature than typical Cronenbergian violence? It is explicitly staged as gendered, often surreal, perversely mutates body surfaces in up-close detail, and explosively disturbs the immediate social environment. What we don't find are elements of mechanical, scientific or medical technologies. With *Eastern Promises*, this is even reduced to the exclusion of guns and machines from violent scenes. Masculine technology in its mechanical or scientific capacity disappears. The organization of machines and mechanization of bodies that is a hallmark of Cronenberg's work is nowhere to be found. Violent masculine technology at the interface of the body and the mechanical is reduced to the male protagonist's handiness with a

gun, knife or ordinary household object (coffee pot, string, etc.). Perhaps this marks another shift in Cronenberg's work on par with the ones Lianne McLarty identifies. If there is a meaningful shift away from conventional Cronenbergian masculine technologies in his later work, then it would be helpful to identify where, when and how this shift takes place.

In *eXistenZ*, very much within the tradition of technological threat, the technology depicted is, uncharacteristically, a markedly feminine one. The game controls resemble internal bodily organs, require nurturing to remain effective, and respond to stimulation with the fingers resembling clitoral masturbation. The game is itself a form of interiority, the rules for navigating it depend less on riddle solving, which gender theory typically categorizes as masculine, and more on modes of communication.²⁶ Moreover, it is a woman who navigates the internal terrain of the game with full agency, acting as both (maternal) author and (phallic) authority. Though technology itself is still characteristically masculine in many ways in *eXistenZ*, I would propose that this film signals the beginning of a significant shift from masculine to feminine technologies and authority/authorship in Cronenberg's recent work.

Cronenberg's next production, *Spider*, is markedly different. Its focus again returns to a male protagonist, though technological threat in a mechanical/scientific form is, as in the two subsequent films, nowhere to be found. This of course doesn't mean that there is no threat and that women no longer play a central role – to the contrary. *Spider* stages the Oedipal conflict gone completely awry. Manfred Riepe concisely articulates the unavoidable formula in Cronenberg's films: "an encounter between genders in the field of sexuality, love and desire has catastrophic consequences."²⁷ Unable to triangulate his relationship to his mother and assimilate the knowledge that she is his father's object of desire and that she herself is a desiring subject,

26 Cf. de Lauretis, Teresa (1984): *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Indiana: Indiana University Press; and Felman, Shoshana (1993): *What Does A Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

27 Riepe, Manfred (2002): *Bildgeschwüre: Körper und Fremdkörper im Kino David Cronenbergs. Psychoanalytische Filmlektüren nach Freud und Lacan*, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, p. 207.

young Spider fantasizes that his father is having an affair with a whorish woman and finally kills his mother as a consequence. The resulting psychic trauma is two-fold, as he can neither assimilate knowledge of murdering his mother, nor, as Riepe points out, ever escape the mother-son dyad that he has permanently secured *through* the mother's murder. Spider is a boy grown old, but unable to become a man; his psychosis is engendered by Oedipal desire and violence at the site, once again, of the female body.

My question as to how these two filmic narratives can help us understand the shift in the representation of sex, violence and masculine technologies in *History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises* remains. As I have claimed, these films should be categorized in the Cronenbergian tradition of masculine technologies or masculinity as technology invading the female body, but also of female interiority and femininity being brought to the surface of male bodies and infusing masculinity.

Where *eXistenZ* signals a shift in focus from masculine technologies to feminine ones, *Spider* signals a shift in which technologies are no longer mechanical/scientific, but rather psycho-social technologies that are immaterial and ideological in themselves, but implemented and practiced socially.²⁸ In *A History of Violence*, gendered social technologies in the form of violent gangs (masculine) and nurturing domestic space (feminine) clash and are fused at the site of a single body, the male protagonist Tom Stall/Joey Cusack. As noted, this kind of structure, where technology is disruptively in-corporated in a body, is typical of Cronenberg's work. On the one hand, Tom Stall has a "history of violence" in the form of masculine social technology from his former life as Philadelphia gangster Joey Cusack. On the other, Tom embodies different forms of emancipation: first, in that he embraces feminine social technologies in an attempt to emancipate himself from his history of violent masculine social technologies – not only is Tom a benevolent "family man", he also owns and runs a diner, an institution which is easily recognizable as a domestic site of nur-

28 My use of the term 'social technology' should not indicate mechanical/scientific technology used for social purposes (the telephone, social network platforms, etc.), but rather immaterial technologies in the form of ideology, organization, structure, etc. and their implementation in the form of social institutions like government, education, religion, state law and family.

ture. The diner is the feminine domestic setting of the kitchen/hearth in public space *par excellence*. In contrast to his prior life as Joey Cusack, Tom Stall is portrayed as a figure of feminine domesticity at the site of the male body. However, his history of masculine violence returns to claim him, which is generally the case in the two masculine Hollywood genres this film primarily quotes, the Western and the Film Noir.²⁹ Consequently, he takes recourse to the masculine social technologies he also embodies in order to protect his family and be able to return to the feminine social technologies he has invested so much in.

This clash of technologies also has to be understood in ideological, symbolic terms.³⁰ Of course this clash functions on the level of story and discourse, though one quickly recognizes the hyperbolic fictiveness of Tom's character: he is a *killing machine* and at the same time a super-dad. Not only are these two elements of the character presented in a highly fictive manner, they are also incompatible. What is staged in *A History of Violence* is an ideological and philosophical inquiry into possible mutations of masculine social technologies. Such a reading is significantly in line with the entirety of Cronenberg's work and supported by the hyperbolic style overtly indicating that narrative elements such as characters should be read as symbols (as in melodrama, where the protagonist represents good *per se* and the antagonist the opposite).

If we reconsider McLarty's now fifteen-year-old claim, thinking it along with a shift away from medical and media technologies, its validity is still strikingly accurate for Cronenberg's most recent films:

"Others, however, suggest that Cronenberg's films are adversarial inasmuch as they depict an invasive social order [...] which renders the human body defenseless against its control. In fact, some argue that Cronenberg's horror is directed more at the 'patriarchal culprit' and his phallocentric scientific practices than at the monstrous female body."³¹

29 Cf. Loren, Scott (2008): "Self-fashioning, Freedom, and the Problem of His-story: the return of noir", in: European journal of American Studies 1 [online], document 2, <http://ejas.revues.org/1842>.

30 'Symbolic' is used in the conventional sense, not in the sense of the Lacanian symbolic.

31 L. McLarty 1996, p. 231

In *A History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises*, the invasive social order itself is the patriarchal culprit and his phallogocentric social technologies. Along with feminine social technologies, the patriarchal culprit and the threat his violently disruptive social technologies pose to feminine or feminized spaces (of body interiors, families, communities) are the films' narrative focus. Both films are very explicit about this in their opening and closing sequences.

A History of Violence opens with two men murdering the owners of a small family run motel, including the little daughter, who one of the murderers shoots point blank in the face. Then there is a jump-cut to the home of the Stall family (a match-cut, in fact, aligning the daughters of both families for emphasis). When the daughter screams waking up from a nightmare, as if she herself dreamt what happened at the motel, the entire Stall family comes rushing in to see if she is okay, sits together on her bed, and stages a highly idealized small-town American family idyll. The film ends with Tom Stall returning to the domestic scene of a dinner ritual after having killed everyone, notably all men, from his past who might pose a threat to his family. *Eastern Promises* opens with three men in a barber shop, two of them murdering the third and then cuts to a young pregnant woman, bleeding from between her legs and passing out on the floor of a chemist shop. Subsequently we see her in the hospital, where, accompanied by the nurse Anna, the baby is saved but the mother dies from the (masculine) violence she sustained. As we learn, she is a victim of human trafficking by an influential family in the London Russian mafia. Like *A History of Violence*, the film ends in the domestic space of the family home, the protagonist having adopted the motherless baby, reconstituting the family space that had initially been lost. As with Tom Stall, Nikolai Luzhin seems to have more than a professional interest in aligning himself with and supporting the matriarchal practices and agencies at work in the narrative. Even privately, he repeatedly acts in accord with the will and interests of Anna, who herself might be seen as "a collection of maternal signifiers"³². Beyond the tactical maneuvers that will help him successfully infiltrate the mafia at the highest

32 Kuersten, Erich (2008): "Naomi Watts: Cinema's Postmodern Mother of Mirrors", in: Bright Lights Film Journal 59, <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com>.

level, his actions appear to be guided by ideological impulses that could match or even be Anna's.

What is perhaps more consequent in *Eastern Promises* is the final portrayal of the domestic space as being constituted and inhabited exclusively by women (the mother, the daughter and the adopted granddaughter) and the impossibility of a masculine presence at this site. Each film, though, is bookended by a juxtaposition of violent masculine social practices against nurturing maternal social practices, establishing the thematic focus in the narrative exposition and the closure. What we witness in the rest of the narrative trajectory is a male protagonist mediating the space between these two technologies.

The intimacy, or *extimacy*,³³ that was staged in earlier films by a blurring of borders between biological interiors and exteriors is now staged at and as a socio-ideological space. It is thus also logical that these later films are not within the "body genre" to the same extent as Cronenberg's earlier films. The "feminine interiority" the male heroes of *A History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises* have is no longer signified through vaginal openings on the surface of their bodies as in earlier films, but rather as a psycho-social and ideological feminine interiority reflected in their social practices, or in the social technologies they ultimately support. The element of feminine interiority in Tom Stall and Nikolai Luzhin is substantiated and given further primacy in that their behavior and their bodies as particular *masculine types* are not merely staged, but the staging is portrayed as a fundamental element of the films' development in terms of story, discourse and the film's socio-philosophical reflection.

Both films present classical forms of cinematic masculinity *as staged*, as spectacle, as masquerade, shifting the perspective by 180 degrees in each. *Eastern Promises* portrays the "good cop" *staging* the hardened criminal. *A History of Violence* portrays the hardened criminal *staging* the "good father/husband". In both cases, it can be argued that something is inextricably infusing – or, to draw on the Cronenbergian tradition, "infecting" – the other. Furthermore, the element of masquerade is also at work in these films, with cinematic hyper-masculinity performed as spectacle.

33 Cf. Bronfen, Elisabeth (2007): "Extimate Violence: Shakespeare's Night World", in: Shakespeare Jahrbuch 2007: Gewalt und Terror, Bochum: Kamp Verlag, pp. 132-146.

In his discussion of masculinity as spectacle in the work of Anthony Mann (known for his epic cinema, Westerns and Film Noirs), Steve Neale quotes Paul Willeman:

“The viewer’s experience is predicated on the pleasure of seeing the male ‘exist’ (that is walk, move, ride, fight) in or through cityscapes, landscapes or, more abstractly, history. And on the unquiet pleasure of seeing the male mutilated (often quite graphically in Mann) and restored through violent brutality.”³⁴

Extending Mulvey’s claims about the erotic gaze related to the depiction of male heroes, he suggests that the viewing pleasures of witnessing violent brutality of and directed at the male hero are characteristically homosexual. That is to say, the male gaze takes pleasure in viewing the eroticized male/masculine hero. In *Eastern Promises*, masculinity is indeed staged as spectacle – a performance to be looked at, both intra-diegetically by other characters in the narrative and extra-diegetically by the viewer. Within the film narrative, masculinity is a (very serious) masquerade, which is then enjoyed from the (masculine) position of the viewer.

Mary Ann Doane argues that masquerade, typically feminine, is effective “precisely in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image”³⁵. The masquerade provides distance and difference between the female spectator and the feminine object she is viewing, but can also be compensatory for women in positions of phallic authority.³⁶ Isn’t something like this taking place in the staging of masculine masquerade in *Eastern Promises* and *A History of Violence*, where homoerotic enjoyment of masculine spectacle, a compensatory balancing out of masculinity and femininity, and the signifying of masculinity as an act are central?

There is, moreover, a kind of literalness to the notion of imposed exteriors and exposed interiors in *Eastern Promises*: the imposed exterior is a violent story of masculinity that is literally written on the

34 Willeman, Paul (1981): “Anthony Mann: Looking at the Male”, in: *Framework*, 15-17 (Summer), pp. 16-20 quoted in S. Neale, 1993, p. 13.

35 Doane, Mary Ann (1982): “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator”, in: *Screen* 23 (3-4), pp. 74-88.

36 Cf. Riviere, Joan (1929): “Womanliness as a masquerade”, in: *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10, pp. 303-313.

skin of Nikolai's body, defining him as a subject through his appearance and his actions. When his interiority is exposed in the form of feminine social technologies, the interiority and its exposure feminizes him (like Max Renn in *Videodrome* or the Mantle twins in *Dead Ringers*), but it is not only the condition of interiority that is feminizing. The particular quality of his interiority – the “hidden” female social technologies that are suggested when he covertly provides help in a maternal manner – is itself also feminine. As such, Cronenberg achieves an intermingling of masculinity and femininity at the site of the male body that is highly complex. The “technologies of gender” that shift over and through gendered bodies are, on the one hand, masculine technologies and masculinity as technology, and on the other female interiority and femininity. Both are brought to the surface of male bodies and inextricably infuse masculinity in Cronenberg's cinema.